

US uses ASEAN summit to escalate confrontation with Beijing

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The US administration and its allies are ramping up their threats against China, using the annual foreign ministers' summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) this week in Malaysia to accuse Beijing of "militarising" the South China Sea.

These allegations have intensified the tensions over these strategic waters that contain some of the world's most heavily used shipping routes, raising the danger of triggering a US-China war, whether by deliberate provocation or miscalculation.

US Secretary of State John Kerry led a concerted offensive at the summit. He told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Li that the United States was concerned about China's alleged large-scale land reclamation on islands in the sea and the "militarisation of features there." According to a State Department briefing, Kerry urged China to halt its construction projects.

Turning reality on its head, the US alleges that China is preparing for wars of aggression in the region, when Washington, as part of its "pivot to Asia," is stepping up its military capacities and activities throughout the region and urging its partners to do the same.

Beijing opposed any move to place the disputed South China Sea islands on the agenda of the 10-member ASEAN summit, in keeping with China's long-standing policy of seeking to directly negotiate territorial claims bilaterally with its neighbours, rather than through multi-national forums.

Nevertheless, Washington's regional partners, including Malaysia, which is hosting this year's gathering, insisted on making China's building of island facilities a focus of the two-day summit, which concludes today.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak declared it was time for ASEAN to "take a more active role" in "regional security," including handling "overlapping

[territorial] claims." In the past, ASEAN refused to intervene in the decades-old territorial disputes between China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei.

US State Department spokesman Mark Toner backed Najib's proclamation, saying it would be "natural" for ASEAN to address such a "critical aspect of regional security." ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh, a Vietnamese politician, agreed. He alleged that China was "eroding the very trust and confidence ... between ASEAN and China."

Three of Washington's closest allies, the Philippines, Japan and Australia, ratcheted up the campaign against Beijing. The Philippines, which is mounting a US-orchestrated legal challenge to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, rejected China's attempt to defuse the conflict by announcing that it had completed its island reclamations.

Philippines Foreign Minister Albert Del Rosario accused China of conducting "massive reclamation activities" that have "undermined peace, security and stability" in the South China Sea. "We see no let up on the unilateral and aggressive activities of our northern neighbour," he said, adding: "The Philippines fully supports and will pro-actively promote the call of the United States on the '3 halts:' halt in reclamation, halt in construction, and halt in aggressive actions that could further heighten tensions."

In a statement, Japan's senior vice foreign minister Minoru Kiuchi "voiced deep concern over unilateral actions that change the status quo and heighten tensions in the South China Sea, including large-scale land reclamation, the construction of outposts and their use for military purposes." Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said she would also "register" Australia's concern over the rising tensions.

While endeavouring to de-escalate the confrontation, the Beijing leadership refused to halt construction on the islands. It further insisted that countries outside the region—a reference to the US and other Western powers—should not interfere with its efforts to reach bilateral settlements with neighbouring countries. “Countries that are not in the region should respect the efforts made by China and ASEAN countries,” Wang told Kerry.

The foreign minister underlined China’s complaints that the US and its partners are militarising the South China Sea by staging patrols and joint military drills. He said the US and the Philippines should “count how many runways there are in the South China Sea and who built them first.”

Over the past two decades, other claimants to islands in the sea have developed similar outposts to China’s. In the Spratly islands alone, Vietnam has 48 outposts; the Philippines, 8; Malaysia, 5, and Taiwan, 1; while China now has 8. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan already have airstrips on islets that they control.

While Washington accuses Beijing of militarising the South China Sea, the US military-build-up in the region, which includes new basing arrangements with Australia, the Philippines and Singapore is aimed at ensuring its control over these strategic waters. A key aspect of the Pentagon’s plans for war against China is through a naval blockade to cut off its supplies of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

Washington’s provocative intervention in the South China Sea disputes is one aspect of the broader “pivot to Asia” which is aimed at undermining China and securing American dominance throughout Asia.

Recent economic blows suffered by Washington in the Asia-Pacific region, notably the failure of its efforts to block the establishment of the \$100 billion China-led Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank and last weekend’s breakdown of talks on the proposed US-dominated Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bloc, have increased the danger of the US ruling elite resorting to military might to counter China.

The Obama administration is under pressure from within the US political and military establishment to follow through on its threat, mooted in May, to send US war planes and naval ships into the 12-nautical-mile

zones around Chinese-controlled islands. Such shows of force, conducted under the fraudulent banner of enforcing “freedom of navigation,” could spark armed conflict.

Former Republican Party presidential candidate John McCain, chair of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, told *Politico* this month that not allowing the navy to operate within the zones was “a dangerous mistake that grants de facto recognition of China’s man-made sovereignty claims.”

According to *Politico*, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, is privately advocating such operations. Harris last month publicly warned China to cease its “aggressive coercive island building.” Addressing a high-level US security forum, he charged that China was constructing forward operating bases for combat against its neighbours, making them “clearly and easily targets in any combat scenario with China.”

Such open talk of war against China underscores the danger that the aggressive campaign being waged by the US and its collaborators will provoke a catastrophic military conflagration, potentially involving nuclear weapons.

Harris recently took a military surveillance aircraft “cruise” over the area, as did Admiral Scott Swift, the new US commander of the Pacific Fleet. In May, a US Navy P-8 flew over the disputed island where China was constructing an airstrip, prompting warnings by Chinese radio callers to leave the territory. That incident underscored the hair trigger danger of the eruption of a terrible war.



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